

FINAL

Minutes: Nineteenth Meeting of the Alaska Scientific Review Group

**20-21 January 2006
Anchorage, AK**

This report summarizes the 19th meeting of the Alaska Scientific Review Group (SRG). This document is intended to summarize the main points of the discussion and does not attempt to repeat everything that was said during the meeting. The revised agenda is included as Appendix 1 and the list of SRG members and observers present is provided in Appendix 2.

1) Adoption of agenda

After some discussion, the agenda was adopted.

2) General Administration

Travel

Angliss asked whether there were any travel issues related to this meeting; SRG members indicated that there were not, and that S. Austin was a pleasure to work with in setting up travel for this meeting. Angliss reminded SRG members to turn in travel promptly.

Logistics for Saturday

There was a brief discussion about logistics for the SRG meeting on Saturday, which is open to the public, but will involve using a building that is not open to the public. Meeting times were discussed and agreed to.

3) Adoption of minutes from November 2004 meeting

The AK SRG made the following final comments on the draft final minutes for the November 2004 SRG meeting:

- * There is nothing in the draft minutes about the changes in the harbor seal abundance estimates. Add citations to the relevant papers that show where the discussion of the drastic increase in abundance.
- * There are a few places in the draft minutes that state “insert reference”; do a search for these statements and insert the reference.
- * The SRG was curious about the marine mammal Stock Assessment Improvement Plan; Angliss committed to add a link to the report in the minutes for this meeting¹.
- * J. Gauvin indicated that some of his statements reflected in the SRG meeting minutes required clarification; he provided alternate text.

The minutes were adopted as amended.

4) Update on NMML research funding and plans for FY06

¹ This report can be found at: http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/sars/improvement_plan.pdf

Angliss provided a brief overview of planned NMML research and funding as of January 2006 (Appendix 3). As of January 2006, NMML's initial budget allocation was approximately \$11M. Of this, \$5.1M is needed for salary. The Congressional "Alaska Composite" line item provides both salary and project support for NMML's Steller sea lion, northern fur seal, Alaska harbor seal, ice seal, California sea lion, and Alaska killer whale research. As of January 2006, funds for the critically endangered North Pacific right whale were minimal, and made available only via a Congressional line item.

Burn noted that the USFWS is in a similar situation regarding funding: almost their entire budget is salary, and there is little support remaining for field work.

The SRG voice surprise that the funds available for North Pacific right whales were so modest. Angliss noted that the only funds available came from a Congressional line item provided for FY06; because the agency is prohibited from requesting funds, there is no way to increase the amount of funding for right whales. Mathews questioned how so much money was provided to study North Atlantic right whales; Angliss indicated that this was a result of lobbying by several NGO groups which secured millions of dollars, annually, for North Atlantic right whale studies.

Lowry noted that, in his opinion, the stock assessment process set up by the 1994 amendments to the MMPA is not working. NMFS has not embraced the fact that stock assessment is a big part of their mission, and the vision of having a regular rotation of assessments between species has not been achieved. Lowry asked what would be needed of what level of resources it would take in order to achieve the original planned assessment rotation. Matkin added that NMFS should be doing basic assessments before conducting research.

5) Update on recommendations made by the SRG in November 2004

Angliss provided the following summary of how NMFS handled recommendations made by the Alaska SRG at the last SRG meeting:

- Harbor seal stock structure should be updated: The stock structure has not been update, and will not be updated until it can be done cooperatively with NMFS' comanagement partners. Instead, per the SRGs request, Angliss has provided new data on abundance and mortality levels for harbor seals using the old stock structure.
- NMFS should reconsider whether the 4.5 expansion factor for NFS is appropriate: Angliss spoke with the species experts and no update to the 4.5 expansion factor is available, or will be available for some time. Thus, NMFS will retain the use of this factor in estimating abundance.
- Add more habitat concerns to the Habitat Concerns section of CIB: There was considerable discussion about this. Angliss indicated concern that the "habitat concerns" section could be a "catch-all" for a variety of vague concerns about potential threats to a stock. The SRG indicated that there was no intent to do this; instead, the "habitat concerns" section should include areas where data or strong implication indicate a concern.
- Develop a long-term plan for the AMMOP: Mansfield attended the SRG meeting and later provided an update on the long-term plan for the AMMOP.

- Convene a meeting to review/revise the serious injury guidelines: Eagle reported that this meeting was scheduled for late summer 2005. However, this meeting was later canceled due to lack of funding when the agency was placed on a Continuing Resolution early in FY07.
- Clarify that it is inappropriate to calculate a PBR level for any declining stock: It is not inappropriate to calculate a PBR level for any declining stock. Instead, the guidelines for developing PBR levels provide considerable flexibility in how to designate the PBR level should a stock be declining.
- Update on the letters regarding ice seals and general recommendations: Angliss asked about the status of the letters that were to be sent to NMFS relaying recommendations regarding ice seals and other issues. Hills indicated that the letters had not yet been sent.

6) Update on the List of Fisheries

Angliss provided a brief update on the changes in fishery classification in the List of Fisheries published pursuant to section 117 of the MMPA. Fisheries were recently defined by area, gear type, and target species, in lieu of just area and gear type. Five of the 23 groundfish fisheries in Alaska were recently found to incur “occasional” serious injuries or mortalities of marine mammals incidental to their operations, and were thus placed into Category II in the List of Fisheries.

7) USFWS SAR updates

Sea otters (missed whole thing)

Polar bear update

[missed some – get from Hills]

Main headings

No new abundance; Nmin continues to be unknown; however, estimate there’s ~2000 animals. Population is probably declining due to high harvests in Chukotka

Matkin questioned whether the decline in polar bears is caused by the subsistence harvest. Schliebe responded that this may be the case. Chukotka villages lost their salary subsidies many years ago and now have very few ways to earn money; locals have since started to go out on the land to find food. Initially, the harvest started out of desperation. Now, people seem to enjoy the hunt and enjoy eating bear, so the harvest has continued. There probably are some non-Native peoples taking bears, but not for sport. Information from a variety of Russians that the polar bear harvest is ~200/year. Modeling indicates that with an abundance of 4000 and a harvest of 200/year, the population would decline rapidly. However, we don’t know whether the population is as high as 4000, or whether the harvest is as low as 200.

Schleibe noted that there is no new information on the number to use for Rmax; without this number, it is recommended to continue to use the Beaufort Sea figure. Mitch Taylor is looking at Nunavut polar bear populations using a mark-recapture approach, but they don’t have this for the Chukchi polar bear stock. Kelly questioned whether there is an indication that the Nunavut

population is actually increasing at R_{max} . Overall, there was general comfort with using the R_{max} for the Beaufort stock for the Chukchi stock.

The status of the Chukchi polar bear stock is uncertain, as there is insufficient data to state whether the population is strategic or not.

In February 2005, the U.S. FWS was petitioned to list polar bears as “threatened” under the ESA. They anticipate making a positive finding indicating that there is substantial information within the petition to warrant an official status review.

Matkin questioned why a harvest agreement has not yet been ratified. Schleibe responded that the USFWS has tried to implement the treaty and is currently awaiting action by the full Senate.

Johnson noted that he has requested funds to conduct a population survey of polar bears in the Chukchi, and hopes to get these funds in the future. Schleibe added that this would most likely be an aerial survey; a feasibility study has already confirmed that aerial surveys are a reasonable approach. Schleibe is working with West, Inc to simulate aerial surveys and improve them, if possible. One drawback of the aerial surveys is that population metrics, such as survival, recruitment, condition, etc are not collected using this approach.

Hills pointed out that the increase in subsistence harvest of the Chukchi stock happened in 1992, and asked what evidence is there that the population is decreasing. Schleibe responded that the only evidence is that the Alaska Native harvest has declined 50% since 1992. The decline in harvest may be caused by a decline in bear abundance or a change in bear distribution. Angliss added that the drastic changes in sea ice could be driving changes in bear distribution that would affect the harvest. Schleibe responded that bears in the Chukchi will be impacted extensively by changes in sea ice.

Johnson noted that there had recently been a study of the habitat of polar bears in Chukotka that should be published soon. This study did identify some habitat areas of concern, and the government of Chukotka is using the results of the study as background for a management plan. Johnson hopes that, with passage of the legislation, can put management measures in place in Russia.

Barrett-Lennard questioned whether the Russian plan will include enforcement of harvest limits. Johnson replied that there is no enforcement at this time, but that it would be included in the management plan.

The SRG asked Schleibe if he can he include information on habitat concerns for polar bears in the SARs. He responded that this would not be possible. Because the USFWS just got petitioned to list polar bears under the ESA, the agency is reluctant to put anything in writing regarding habitat issues.

The SRG elected not to make any specific recommendations to the USFWS regarding the polar bear legislation because their comment would likely be restricted to “work harder”, and it’s pretty clear that the USFWS is pursuing the legislation as quickly as they can.

8) Marine Mammal Observer Program update

Bridget Mansfield provided an update on the Marine Mammal Observer Program. Mansfield is currently working on a long-term plan for the observer program that will have the following goals:

- * determine whether mortality/serious injury is occurring in Category II fisheries in Alaska that are not part of the federal observer program
- * determine if PBR levels are being exceeded by the level of mortality/serious injury

She indicated that meeting these goals is possible with the existing programs, but that it will take many years to collect information on all known Category II fisheries in Alaska. The program's biggest problem is funding. The AKR just finished a 2-year observer program directed at the Kodiak set gillnet fishery; this program cost 1.5M in 2005 for 13 observers. The remoteness of the fisheries and the logistics of getting observers to the sites is incredibly expensive.

Unfortunately, the AMMOP is one of two observer programs in the country that is not supported, at least in part, through a line item from Congress.

Mansfield indicated that the top priority for the AMMOP is observing the SE drift gillnet fishery. However, because the AMMOP received less support in FY06 than needed for the SE drift gillnet fishery (approximately \$2M/year), they have decided to place approximately 16 observers on the Yakutat gillnet fishery instead.

The AKR now has a 4-year contract in place w/Saltwater Inc and MRAG. In FY06, the companies will be doing a feasibility study in Yakutat set gillnet fishery. The observer program will be implemented fully in 2007 and 2008, at a cost of \$1.2M for each year. The costs are high because the vessels in the fishery are small, so observers must have their own vessel, and a larger vessel for the observers to sleep on; these vessel charters are very expensive.

In response to a question from the SRG, Mansfield noted that the AKR is currently using the DeMaster/Wade calculation of harbor porpoise takes in Cook Inlet to set desirable observer coverage levels. The AKR has contracted with West, Inc to conduct another analysis of necessary observer coverage.

The SRG reiterated their concerns from 2006 that if the take rates are so low that a huge amount of effort is needed to achieve a good mortality estimate, NMFS might start thinking about other ways to get the information. Mathews suggested that stranding data be used to assess gillnet related mortalities; Mansfield indicated that the AKR does not get reports of a large number of animals washing ashore during periods when gillnets are fishing. Gauvin recommended using cameras in lieu of people to observe the gillnet fisheries; Mansfield indicated that this might be possible for the drift gillnet fleet, but not for the set gillnet fleet.

Angliss asked whether the AKR had considered observing "hot spots" in Southeast Alaska to estimate takes in areas where takes are a concern. Mansfield indicated that this was not considered. Straley commented that selecting hotspots in SE might bias numbers.

Lowry commented that NMFS does not seem to have sufficient funding to get either good mortality estimates or good trend data. Because of this ongoing problem, it may be preferable to always strive to reduce takes, because fewer takes is always good. Mansfield responded that the AKR has been trying to develop proactive ways of working with fishermen to reduce takes. Gauvin commented that, if you try to mitigate a problem before you know the extent of the problem, you might waste a lot of \$\$\$. He suggested using methods other than an observer program (interviews with captains? other methods?) to assess levels of takes.

Wynne noted that she had drafted a letter to NMFS about mitigating impacts instead of measuring impacts, per the SRG's discussions in 2005. This letter was not sent last year; Hills acknowledged that this still needed to go out & that it would be handled shortly after the 2006 meeting.

Kelly questioned whether the PBR system as a whole is working. He postulated that, because there is insufficient support to routinely assess stock abundance and trends, or to get good estimates of mortality, the PBR system is not working. Lowry noted that B. Taylor has a draft manuscript addressing this: for 1/2 of the marine mammal stocks in the US, the abundance data are such that the agency wouldn't be able to detect even a 50% decline in a population over 15 years.

SRG members questioned whether it's time to get away from attempting to conduct mortality assessments and focus on mitigating impacts instead. Bridget Mansfield indicated that, if the agency tries to do mitigation without good information, they'll be criticized for acting without information indicating that mortalities are a problem for a fishery.

SRG members made the following comments in support of "alternative" ways of collecting information on take levels:

- interview techniques can be very effective and are really cheap
- alternative methods require engaging the commercial fishing community, which is a good thing to do
- funds currently used for observer programs should be used to assess what fisheries entangle harbor porpoise
- because vertical lines always pose an entanglement threat, use the funds currently used for the observer program to design gear that reduces impacts on whales
- a good team of social scientists might be able to make a lot of progress in assessing take levels through methods other than observer programs

Mansfield noted that, when takes appear sufficiently high to require regulations, the AKR will get criticized if there is not good information on take levels. Thus, while "alternative" methods for assessing take levels sounds appealing, their use may be minimal in a regulatory context.

Lowry noted that the agency should always develop mitigation measures even when the mortality rates are low because the goal is to reach the ZRMG. He questioned whether the SRG should make a recommendation that we won't see the types of information that will really make

the PBR system work. He noted that the Pacific SRG thinks that the agency should monitor and mitigate at the same time.

Lowry also noted that the Alaska SRG has been slow to call stocks strategic when there is no information, and suggested that stocks be called strategic if there isn't enough information to do otherwise. If this route was taken, the SRG could force the formation of take reduction teams and the system would melt down.

Hills summarized that it seems that all the "easy" information on marine mammal incidental take levels has been collected. The agency now much collect information on many fisheries that use small boats and have many participants, and it is not clear what the best way is to collect incidental take information for these fisheries.

The SRG requested an explanation of how the LOF is implemented, such as what data are used to classify fisheries, what years are used, how do you figure out what goes in the LOF table of interactions.

9) Serious injury update

Tom Eagle provided a summary of the serious injury issue. Headquarters has been hearing now for a few years that the current guidelines need to be reassessed. NMFS Headquarters has nominated a steering committee for the workshop. The workshop will be held in 2006, and will involve presentations on new studies and data (e.g. pathobiology, time series of information on entangled animals) regarding what injuries are likely to cause mortality. NMFS Headquarters is currently trying to decide exactly what topics to cover and who should attend.

Hills noted that, despite repeated calls to reassess the guidelines, NMFS does not seem to have progressed very far.

Eagle responded that the earliest the workshop could happen would be early May 2006. The goal of the workshop will be to develop recommendations on what revised guidelines would look like, including how we can improve on what guidelines we currently use. Eagle anticipates developing both a workshop report and a Federal Register notice highlighting revised guidelines.

Hills noted that it is not clear that a hearing from a pathobiologist will help answer the Alaska SRGs questions. The SRG is interested in very practical instructions for implementing the guidelines, what data needs to be available, etc. Angliss noted that the steering committee had already discussed reserving a large portion of time for reviewing how serious injury determinations are made.

The SRG strongly recommended that the steering committee should take into consideration the recommendations made by the subcommittee that reviewed injured/entangled large whales to determine "serious injury" last year.

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10) Membership

The SRG had a closed-door meeting regarding membership. SRG members discussed various opinions regarding a need for adding individuals with expertise in Arctic marine mammals, population dynamics, and environmental advocacy. Some preliminary recommendations regarding new members were made, but final recommendations were delayed until a conference call scheduled for February.

Angliss described the current process for adding new members. In the recent past, new members were simply added by NMFS. Next time a new member is added, NMFS will solicit input from the USFWS and the Governor of Alaska regarding who should be appointed to the SRG to fill a particular role.

11) Use of logbook data

Angliss brought up the use of logbook, or self-report, data in the SARs. She noted that other SAR authors have stopped using self-report data because of its lack of reliability.

SRG members questioned whether there are any situations where all we have for a fishery is logbook/self report data. Angliss replied that this may be the case for a few fisheries, such as the Bristol Bay salmon gillnet and Southeast Alaska purse seine fisheries.

Although there were some concerns about not using the logbook data, the SRG recommended that it no longer be incorporated in the stock assessment reports for individual stocks. Angliss will still include self-report data in an appendix to the SARs so the data are readily available to readers and managers have the data readily available. Hills – should make a distinction between logbooks & MMAP self reports

The SRG also discussed the use of “old” data in the SARs. In particular, the 1990-91 estimate of Steller sea lion mortality levels in Prince William Sound is still being incorporated in the SARs and used for fishery classification purposes. Mansfield responded that the guidelines state that the SARs should use the most recent 5 years of information, or the best available information, and for some fisheries, such as the Prince William Sound salmon drift gillnet fishery, the best available information is old.

12) SRG comments on the 2006 draft Stock Assessment Reports

The SRG asked about what the guidelines for developing Stock Assessment Reports say about prorating mortalities between stocks if we don’t know what stock it is. At this time, the draft guidelines say that all mortalities should be prorated. The AKSRG recommended that this be changed to make it clear that prorating is not appropriate if the stock structure is unknown. Instead, the mortality should be assessed as if it came from either stock.

Changes in SAR tables

Angliss summarized changes made in the SAR Appendix 2 that provides a summary of key parameters for each stock:

- Columns for the correction factor and the CV for the correction factor were deleted to make spaces for new columns.
- The column “0.5 Rmax” was changed to “Rmax”
- Two new columns were added. “Survey interval/year” was added to provide information on the frequency and most recent survey conducted. “Total mortality” was added to provide a sum of the total human-related mortality levels that could be compared to the PBR levels.

Comments on individual NMFS SARs

Ice seals

The SRG discussed whether ice seals should be considered to be “strategic” under the MMPA. Lowry noted that, by calling the ice seals “non-strategic”, the implication is that the total human-related mortality levels are less than a calculated PBR level. However, for the ice seals, there are no PBR levels. Eagle pointed out that when NMFS first developed the ice seal SARs, the SRG heard input from Alaska Native hunters that it had not become more difficult to hunt seals. In addition, expert opinion was that harvest levels at the time were far below the PBR levels. Hills added that the SRG was reluctant to recommend that the ice seal stocks be considered strategic because it would highlight the subsistence harvest. Based on these inputs, NMFS determined that the status of ice seals was not strategic. Lowry responded that the situation has changed, the ice is receding, and we have no level of confidence that there is not a problem with ice seals. When the SRG first provided input on this, there was an expectation that new information on abundance would be forthcoming and that the status could be assessed using numbers.

Charlie added that hunting of bearded seals has been declining, but that the feeling is that the decline is due to changes in ice conditions, not reduction in numbers of animals.

Kelly questioned whether there is guidance in the GAMMS reports that indicates when we should call something strategic, as the AK SRG should be consistent with other SRGs in recommending strategic status. In addition, he pointed out that stock identification for ice seals is critical; biologists and managers have often been wrong about stock identification. For instance, he is seeing very strong fidelity of ringed seals to breeding sites. Because of the high likelihood of finding multiple stocks, Kelly’s concern about ice seal status is elevated. Lowry stated that the decision should be straightforward: does the data allow us to say that the level of take is likely below PBR? Barrett-Lennard added that, in the absence of input from the SRG, if there is no information on the status, stocks should be considered strategic. **Lowry stated that he would draft a few sentences about stock status that could be inserted into the SARs for ice seals.**

The SRG suggested that NMFS double check the species identification of spotted seals taken in the commercial fisheries.

Charlie noted that there is some interest in getting ice seals listed as a “species of concern” under the Endangered Species Act because there may be funds available for these species from NMFS. Angliss responded that the pot of NMFS funds for “species of concern” is very small, and cannot be used for marine mammals because they have separate pots of funds.

Alaska harbor seals

Prior to the SRG meeting, recent peer review comments of the data on harbor seal stock structure were circulated to the SRG for review and discussion. SRG members voiced considerable frustration that there have been no updates to the stock structure for harbor seals despite the collection and analysis of 900+ genetics samples and peer review that states the existing stock designations are wrong. The SRG members recognize that the concern is that stock assessment process would be used to manage subsistence harvest; however, the reports are not intended for this purpose. One member noted that the Marine Mammal Commission is encouraging NMFS to move forward with stock ID now, before there is agreement with our comanagers.

Angliss responded that NMFS remains committed to work with our comanagers to define harbor seal stocks.

Matkin noticed that, despite the apparently large sample size, the peer review comments recommended that samples size should be increased in some areas. Given lack of samples in some areas, it is not clear how cautious NMFS should be about drawing the boundaries.

Kelly identified three points for discussion: 1) Can the SRG improve upon the reviews of harbor seal stock structure? 2) Should the SRG make recommendations about stock id? and 3) Is it appropriate for the SRG to tell the agency how to work with it’s comanagers?

Lowry noted that the SRG can’t do their job without looking at the level of take compared to the abundance of smaller units, and requested that NMFS present the SRG with the data based on the best scientific understanding of the actual stock structure.

Barrett-Lennard noted that, by putting the stock structure data out for peer review, the agency has ensured the quality of the data in hand. It’s clear that none of the peer reviews identify any fatal flaws; further, all reviewers agree that stock structure is more complicated than 3 stocks. Most reviewers discuss the possibility of incorporating nuclear DNA into the discussion. Taylor/O’Corry-Crowe rebutted this by stating that mtDNA is a better marker. Taylor/O’Corry-Crowe also point out that they are not arguing that the proposed 12 groups of harbor seals are genetically independent. . .instead, they’re arguing that they’re largely demographically independent, so a decline in one area is unlikely to be rescued by immigration from another area. Most reviews admit that the distribution of sampling effort could be better. Overall, Barrett-Lennard is in agreement with Lowry that the approach taken is generally productive and that there is a 12-stock approach that should be officially proposed.

Gauvin pointed out that all reviews agreed that the existing structure is incorrect, but there wasn’t agreement that there were 12 stocks. Some peer reviews thought that there should be 10 stocks.

Angliss noted that one way forward might be to call the units “prospective stocks,” which is now allowable under the revised guidelines for developing SARs.

Matkin responded that the SRG probably doesn’t want to tell the agency how to implement a particular SRG request; whether the agency chooses to develop prospective stocks or something else is up to the agency. The key point is to present the information on abundance and mortality levels for the appropriate unit.

Hills noted that there is some precedent for including prospective stocks in SARs; this approach has already been done for the central North Pacific stock of humpback whales. Some SRG members and attendees were in favor of using prospective stocks; others were concerned that taking this step would cause political problems that would reduce the ability of NMFS to work with their comanagement partners. Matkin noted that the SRG’s role is to ignore the politics, make recommendations about the best science, and let the agency go from there. Mathews is supportive both of Lowry’s concern about the lack of new stocks and the comanagement process. The real concern is that if the agency waits too long to update the SARs in a meaningful way, there could be major problems with harbor seal populations that are “hidden” because of the current, inaccurate stock structure.

Angliss questioned whether any audience or SRG members knowledgeable about the comanagement committee could provide an update on how long it will take to reach agreement on new stocks. Kelly indicated that he has no idea how long it will take, and stressed that if there is no buy-in, there is no real progress.

Hills questioned whether there is actually a written proposal for stocks on the table for consideration. Angliss indicated that there is, and that it looks very similar to the materials provided to the SRG.

Southeast Alaska harbor seal stock

One SRG member questioned how NMFS decide whether a stranded harbor seal is shot. Angliss responded that dead, stranded harbor seals that are shot are assumed to be counted in the “struck and lost” reported for the subsistence harvest. Illegal shootings are included when the shooting is reported to NMFS enforcement and is successfully prosecuted.

Gulf of Alaska harbor seal stock

One SRG member noted that, for this SAR, a change in analytical technique resulted in a major change in abundance. This raised the question of whether the SAR should include historical abundance information. The final suggestion was to restrict the discussion of the abundance to the current abundance estimates and direct readers to previous SARs for discussion of other abundance estimates.

In addition, there was a recommendation to retain zeros from observer programs until they are at least 5 years old.

Bering Sea harbor seal stock

The SRG requested that NMFS circulate the Perez in review document and the Fritz and Stinchcomb in press paper.

Kelly questioned whether all harbor seal stock should be strategic. The Bering Sea wording in the status of stocks section should be used throughout the harbor seal SARs to eliminate inconsistencies about how things are called strategic.

Steller sea lion, western stock

One SRG member asked how new rookeries are being incorporated into the abundance and trend information. Johnson noted that reports by the Walrus Commission show that there are more Steller sea lions at St. Lawrence Island. Also, a hunter recently shot a northern fur seal at Barrow.

The SRG recommended that the 4.5 multiplier be eliminated. This expansion factor is not needed to estimate an Nmin, and there are too many caveats to use the 4.5 to get an Nest. The SRG recommended that the whole paragraph that refers to the 4.5 multiplier be deleted.

Barrett-Lennard is astonished that the agency has spent so much money on Steller sea lions, and the SARs aren't better. He recommended that information on the potential causes of decline be added to the SARs.

The SRG asked when the Manly et al reports would be completed. Mansfield responded that the Cook Inlet report is drafted, but needs to be reviewed by the AFSC; the Kodiak final report is nearly done.

The SRG recommended that information on research mortalities be tabulated in the other mortality section. The permits office should be queried for this information

Steller sea lion, eastern

Research mortalities should be added.

An SRG member questioned whether there are fisheries in BC that incur incidental mortalities of Steller sea lions. Barrett-Lennard indicated that this does occur, but that he is unsure whether estimates are available.

Northern fur seals

The SRG questioned whether, since NFS are in decline, a PBR should be calculated at all. Hills admitted that the population is declining, but the PBR level is still 15K animals. This PBR level implies that the SRG should be much less concerned about northern fur seal takes than other stocks for which the abundance and PBR levels are low.

This was followed by another discussion about whether the PBR and stock assessment process is working the way it should. Lowry noted that the system is not totally broken, as it is possible to determine if PBR is exceeded for a few stocks. However, for the remaining stocks, there is often insufficient information to determine PBR levels or human-related mortality levels.

Barrett-Lennard recommended developing a new formula: for instance, if fishery mortality is a high proportion of the total mortalities, we should be worried. However, if fishery mortality is a low proportion of the total mortalities, we should be less worried.

Kelly recommended that the SRG review each of the stocks in the Alaska and assess whether the PBR system is working.

Lowry indicated that when the MMPA reauthorization was being considered, Lowry suggested doing an initial screening that determined whether a stock is likely to be impacted by commercial fishing; if yes, then do the PBR process. If no, then ignore the PBR process.

An SRG member observed that the danger of calculating a PBR level even for northern fur seals is that someone could look at the large PBR level and assume that the population is doing well and that additional take would be acceptable. . .when that's not actually the case.

Kelly/Barrett-Lennard suggested that the status of stocks section be expanded to point out that taking some northern fur seals would seem acceptable based on the calculated PBR level, but because the stock is declining, there's really no "surplus".

Eagle noted that there is a requirement in the MMPA about including an analysis in the status of stocks that indicates whether fisheries mortality has reached the ZMRG. It might be good to add a broad statement to the SAR that suggests the use of alternative ways of assessing the mortality levels for declining stocks.

After additional discussion, the SRG suggested that the agency not calculate a PBR level for northern fur seals. Gauvin asked about the implications of not calculating a PBR level. Eagle responded that it would be difficult in that situation to make a negligible impact determination, but since the agency had made negligible impact determinations for years prior to the MMPA amendments, the agency would find a way to carry out the process.

Cook Inlet beluga

One SRG member noted disappointment that there's a 25% decrease in the abundance in 2005, but the difference isn't significant. He asked about the power we have to distinguish a trend. Eagle noted that the models suggest that there's a 65% chance that the trend from 1999 to the present is negative. Lowry added that Goodman's model indicates that there was a 40% chance that the population has been in decline; Rod may have run Goodman's model using the 2005 data to get the 65%. It would be nice to provide the SRG with a copy of the Goodman paper.

Wynne recommended that a scan for words like “recently” be done, and that this be eliminated when it refers to things that happened many years ago.

The SRG asked about the status of the ESA status review for CIB. Angliss responded that the AKR is publishing a notice announcing that a status review of CIB will be done.

Lowry recommended that NMFS use the draft IUCN paper for a short list of habitat concerns.

The SRG recommended that the recovery factor be set at 0.1; the fact that it’s still not increasing and it’s being considered for listing under the ESA should be sufficient justification to reduce the recovery factor.

There was a discussion about the genetics of the Yakutat beluga. O’Corry-Crowe has funds from the Marine Mammal Commission to study the Yakutat group. So far, ground counts have resulted in an estimate of 6-12 animals. O’Corry-Crowe is still hoping to get genetics samples. The MMC has not yet received a report of the work, but Lowry reported that the haplotype of the Yakutat animals is the same as a haplotype in Cook Inlet, but the haplotype is not common. Angliss to query O’Corry Crowe to get an update.

The SRG asked whether the Polar Ecosystems group was recording belugas, and recommended that Jansen incorporate a beluga count into their harbor seal studies in that area.

The SRG decided to examine the proposed work on Yakutat beluga and suggest additional work if needed.

Killer whales

Straley noted that sport troll gear was recently found in a killer whale calf stomach.

Matkin would like to see the results of the genetics of the fisheries bycatch written up. Angliss indicated that a paper is currently planned, and that it would be provided.

The SRG identified some needed updates to the abundance and genetics sections; Angliss indicated that these would be postponed until the SARs are next updated in 2008. Thus, the SRG suggested adding a section to killer whale SARs that says that new estimates of abundance, genetics are forthcoming within the next few years.

NMFS should do a search for the term “many killer whale samples” were collected and revise; “many” samples have not been collected.

Matkin noted that there might have been another killer whale taken in the pollock trawl in 2004 that wasn’t recorded by NMFS. Matkin would get the date and location of the “take”. However, after some discussion, it was unclear whether the killer whale “take” was a carcass, or an incidental take.

Sperm whales

Straley mentioned that she recently attended a sperm whale workshop, and there will be a world wide assessment sometime soon. In addition, she has a student doing a study on scarring of sperm whales.

Fin whales

The SRG would like to review Mizroch's "in review" manuscript on fin whale distribution.

Humpback whales

Angliss noted that she had only recently received the stranding data for 2005 for inclusion in the humpback whale SARs. The SRG subcommittee (Wynne, Straley, Matkin, Lowry, Hills) indicated that, if NMFS sends the raw data by the end of the month, they will provide an assessment of serious injury by the end of February.

One SRG member noted that there are some whales that die and strand that are salvaged by Alaska Natives for subsistence purposes. There is concern about reporting these because people may get in trouble. Eagle reminded the group that Alaska Natives have authority under the MMPA to take marine mammals for subsistence purposes, so people should not be worried about reporting the event.

Hills mentioned that Janet Neilson has finished her Master's degree and 60-70% of humpback whales have signs of having been entangled and are no longer entangled. Hills will provide a draft of the thesis.

Harbor porpoise

Angliss noted that an upcoming Dahlheim paper includes qualitative information about a dramatic decline of harbor porpoise in Southeast Alaska. One SRG member mentioned some personal communication with a local in Southeast Alaska who noted that there are many fewer harbor porpoise then there were in the past. Another comment was that there were two harbor porpoise taken in one fishermen's salmon gillnet last summer. One member noted that the Southeast Alaska population should be considered strategic, as there are concerns about trends, no good information about mortality levels, and very old survey data. Another SRG member suggested that all 3 stocks of harbor porpoise should be strategic because of the lack of a decent abundance estimate.

The SRG recommend that new surveys are conducted so that the abundance estimates for harbor porpoise can be updated; obtaining an abundance estimate in Southeast Alaska should take priority because of concerns about declines.

Dall's porpoise

The SRG asked when will new abundance estimates of Dal's porpoise will be available. Angliss responded that a new estimate is under preparation, but would not be available for another year

or two. SRG members asked whether the MacArthur or SPLASH surveys collected incidental information on harbor porpoise or Dall's porpoise. Angliss committed to find out.

Post Pacific white-sided dolphin SARs; post Perez document; updated humpback SARs (once the serious injury stuff is in from the subcommittee)

Set up conference call to discuss membership in about a month

13) SRG meeting schedule

In 2006, the SRG meeting was scheduled to occur immediately before the Alaska Marine Science Symposium so that SRG members could piggyback travel to the Symposium on SRG travel. However, there was some dissatisfaction with this schedule. SRG members wanted more than 1.5 days for the meeting and felt that having two meetings back-to-back was too much time away from their jobs. Further, discussing detailed comments on the draft SARs has become tedious, and SRG members would much rather discuss the science behind the new updates.

After some discussion, the SRG recommended a new process. NMFS will make revised SARs for 2007 and new publications available by mid-December 2006. SAR reviews will be assigned to a few SRG members, who will be responsible for providing their comments to NMFS BEFORE the next SRG meeting. Time will be spent during the meeting to discuss major comments or issues, but participants will not go over detailed comments.

The SRG asked to schedule the meeting for the week of 11/12 January 2007 in Seattle.

Circulate an agenda well ahead of time so the SRG can ask for specific NMML folks to present information if necessary

DRAFT AGENDA – Alaska SRG Meeting

**20-21 January 2006
Anchorage, Alaska**

START TIME: 11am on 20 January

20 January

Federal Building
Room 154

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Adoption of agenda
- 3) General Administration – Travel
- 4) Logistics for Saturday
- 5) Adoption of minutes from November 2004 meeting
- 6) Update on NMML research funding and plans for FY06
- 7) Update on recommendations made by the SRG in November 2004
- 8) Update on the List of Fisheries
- 9) FWS SAR updates
* Dynamics of SE AK sea otter population
- 10) Marine Mammal Observer Program update
- 11) Serious injury update
- 12) Use of logbook data

21 January – 8am

North Pacific Fisheries OTC
707 A Street, Suite 207
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

NMFS SAR updates

- 14) Public comments on the 2005 SARs
- 15) Changes in summary table format
- 16) SAR reviews

Steller sea lion, western

Steller sea lion, eastern

Northern fur seal

Harbor seals

- Updates to abundance, trends, human-related mortality levels within existing stock structure
- SRG interest in developing formal statement to agency about stock structure

Ice seals (minor updates only)

Beluga whale, Cook Inlet

Harbor porpoise (minor updates only)

Pacific white-sided dolphin (minor updates only)

Killer whale, ENP northern resident (updates to fishery related mortality/serious injury)

Killer whale, ENP transient (updates to fishery related mortality/serious injury)

Sperm whale, North Pacific

Fin whale

Humpback whale, both stocks

- Discuss incorporation of stranding/entanglement data (SRG panel review?)
- Discuss timing for major update

Bowhead whale

North Pacific right whale

- 17) Membership – closed session

Appendix 2: List of participants

SRG members

Sue Hills, UA-Fairbanks (chair)
Lloyd Lowry
Brendan Kelly, UA-Fairbanks
Kate Wynne, UA-Fairbanks
Beth Mathews
Charlie Johnson
Craig Matkin
Lance Barrett-Lennard
Jan Straley
Robyn Angliss, NMFS/NMML (executive secretary)

Mike Williams, NMFS/AKR
Donna Willoya
Bridget Mansfield, NMFS/AKR
Sherman Anderson, Nanook Commission
Rick Snyder, Nanook Commission
Tom Eagle, NMFS/F/PR2
Doug Burn, USFWS
Scott Schleibe, USGS
Rosa Meehan, USFWS
Danielle Savarese ANHSC
George Esslinger, USGS
Verena Goll, FWS
Karen Oakley, USGS

Appendix 3: List of initial NMML research projects and allocation of funds for FY06. This list was current as of 11 January 2006; final projects and allocation of funds may have changed subsequent to the development of this list.

ALASKA ECOSYSTEMS PROGRAM

Steller sea lions

- Steller sea lion vital rates
- Steller sea lion pup condition studies
- Steller sea lion foraging ecology
- Steller sea lion food habits
- Steller sea lion abundance trend monitoring
- Russian Steller sea lion vital rates
- SMOCCI hydroacoustic analysis
- Steller sea lion stock structure investigations

Northern fur seals

- Northern fur seal annual population assessments
- Northern fur seal summer mortality studies
- Northern fur seal winter ecology -- mother/pup habitat
- Assessing vital rates of northern fur seals
- Assessing reproductive rates of northern fur seals
- Northern fur seal food habits analyses
- Northern fur seal photo archive

POLAR ECOSYSTEMS PROGRAM

Harbor seals

- Trend surveys of harbors seals on glacial ice
- Harbor seal disturbance in glacial ice habitats
- Harbor seal stock assessment and co-management
- Harbor seal abundance in Alaska
- Harbor seal stock structure

Ice seals

- Ribbon seal ecology, behavior, and habitat selection
- Ecology of bearded, spotted, and ringed seals
- Ice seal co-management
- Ice seal stock structure

CALIFORNIA CURRENT ECOSYSTEMS PROGRAM

California sea lions

- Demography of California sea lions

Hookworm disease

- Hookworm disease in CSL and NFS

OR/CA Steller sea lion demography

- OR/CA Steller sea lion demography

Northern fur seals

- Demography of northern fur seals at San Miguel Island
- Foraging ecology of northern fur seals at SMI

Harbor seals

- Harbor seal demography and genetics of inland stock

West coast gray whales

- West coast gray whale photo identification studies

CETACEAN ASSESSMENT AND ECOLOGY PROGRAM

Cetacean surveys

- Southeast AK cetacean vessel survey

Beluga whales

- Status of Cook Inlet beluga monitoring studies

Killer whales

- Killer whale abundance and foraging

Bowhead whales

- Bowhead abundance, trends, and life history

Humpback whales

- Large whale assessments

NP right whales

- North Pacific right whale ecology



